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# THE CORRIDORS OF CONGRESS

(Revisited in Vacation)

BY ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON

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TREAD soft, intruding step, this empty haunt  
Of swirling crowds has sanctity of grief;  
Precincts of sadness are these marble halls—  
The silent crypts of far and turbulent years.  
These stairways have been treadmills of despair,  
Runways of greed these narrow passages—  
The skirmish-lines of battles fought within,  
Where many a hope, sore-wounded, struggled on  
To perish in the din of others' joy.

Let Fancy listen at these listening walls  
And give us back the record that they bear,—  
These phonographs of sorrow, where are writ,  
In Time's attenuated echoes, sounds  
Not louder than the falling of a tear  
Or sigh of lovers hiding from pursuit.  
Fancy, our finer ear, may here disclose  
Whispers of corner-born conspiracies;  
The embrasured window's furtive interview;  
The guarded plot; the treacherous promise given;  
The tragedy that here was masked as hope.  
Here the dark powers conspired, using as bribes  
Our dearest virtues—goodness, friendship, love.  
Here many who came with dawn upon the brow,  
A voice of confidence, a knightly port,  
Noble expectancy in every step,  
Their own ambition with their country's, one,  
Forgot their holy dreams beneath the stars,  
Sunk in a noonday stupor of prudent air,  
Or, caught by tyrannous currents of routine,  
Swept, first resisting, then resisting not,

Into that pleasant land of Compromise  
That neighbors Hell.

Here is the dryasdust  
Who thinks in dollars, scorning sentiment;  
The township patriot, letting terrors rage  
If only he be safe; the timid good  
For whose slow suffrage all the bold contend;  
The velvet orator whose magniloquence,  
Prick it with wit, runs streams of Privilege;  
The soft-shod schemer, voice behind his hand,  
And flattering arm about his victim's neck;  
The vulgar blusterer, to whom we trust  
The jewel of the nation's dignity,  
Who cannot guard his own; and, faithful clog  
About the feet of Progress, he who spurns  
All as exotic not in his dooryard found,  
Holding the riches of the world as toys:  
Books as expedients to divert the mind  
From the dull scenery 'twixt town and town;  
Art as an adult's picture-book, and Verse  
But as a quarry for a funeral speech.

But one may read a cheerier record here:  
The statesman rare, compact of bold and wise,  
Loving his country like an ancient Greek,  
Physician to the body politic,  
And with physician-chivalry so imbued  
The honest crave his voice, and every rogue  
Reckons him enemy; the sturdy drudge  
Who knows the elusive fact cannot be caught  
In nets of intuition,—sentinel  
Upon the nation's treasure-castle walls,  
Alert to stealthy peril in the night  
From Waste the Traitor as from Greed the Foe;  
The civic soldier, fighting for his land  
As truly as the veteran who defied  
Ambush of fen or forest, standing firm  
To conscience' needle, though from every point  
The shifting winds be clamoring for the wrong.

Oh, there's a bravery greater than the assault  
On ramparts flaming death when but the touch

Of comrade's shoulder gives the heart support,  
When every leaping impulse to go on  
Is multiplied to madness by the crowd,  
And Life is but an alms by Duty flung.  
Peace needs the stouter heart, the cooler mind;  
The truceless warfare on the soul's frontiers  
Calls for a lonelier fortitude; and oft  
The man that will not yield an inch to blows  
Can keep no barrier to tears. He that, alone,  
Would feed his body to the hungry fire,  
Let but a loved one plead, his will is wax.  
Oh, in the unimpassioned scales of Time  
More than the courage of momentum weighs  
The courage of resistance, when to yield  
Is easy as to breathe, and angels urge  
"Only do naught and let the devil pass."

What Iliads of siege these walls could tell!  
What shattered lines a hundred times retrieved  
From lingering defeat—now by the swords,  
Now by the shields, of some sworn group of knights—  
To sweep at last to wreathèd victory!  
What single combats while the hosts looked on!  
What hopes forlorn that failed so gloriously  
That History dropped her stylus to admire!

Of all the hands that held our fasces up,  
I mind me of one servant of the State  
Who walked these halls erect in body and mind.  
Not to corroding ease he gave his days  
But paid his country, coin for coin, in toil.  
Her cut-purse enemies within her gates,  
Her gentlemanly murderers of men's souls,—  
Who with foul gold would poison every fount  
Of Hope and Justice we have built for all,—  
And their accomplices who smilingly  
Betray a nation to oblige a friend,  
Him came not nigh with their accursed arts,  
To tempt, to beg, to threaten, to cajole.  
Though richly gifted, he disprized his gifts—  
Far vision, loyal reasoning, kindling speech,  
And true intent that pilots in the dark.  
Not faultless, he could frankly own his fault,

And salve with candor the impetuous wound.  
While he was speaking nothing seemed of worth  
But the high path he trod—not happiness,  
Nor peace, nor love, nor leisured luxury,  
Nor that acclaim of many called success,  
But to be leader in the march of Man.  
With more ambition, he had been of those  
Who from its trance of comfort wake the world,  
And leave a name to stir the pulse of youth.  
Thoughtless of fame,—without the artist-sense  
Of the deed's value, miscalled vanity—  
He left to chance the record of those days.  
His tribute is the passionate regret  
Of comrades fighting still, the respect of foes,  
Who miss his swift sword and his dented shield.  
Remembering how at one great breach he stood  
Pleading for honor when men sued for gain,  
I hear not only echoes of his voice  
But strains of patriot music from the Past:  
The harp of David, laureate of the Lord,  
Sounding the spirit's summons to his race;  
The lyre of Sophocles, half looking back  
To cheer his followers, now as brave as he;  
The horn of Roland, clear from brim to brim  
Of Pyrenean valleys, with its call,  
“Come up and find your courage on the heights.”

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Not only with a brother's pride and love  
Weave I for him this coronal of verse—  
Affection's salvage from the wreck of Time—  
But with the hope that for some wavering soul,  
Tempted to point of tension, it may turn  
A cup of trembling to a cup of strength,  
And make us proud of all the brave who guard  
The walls that guard the freedom of the land.

ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON.